

# BLACKFOOT RIVER WATERSHED

Montana Partners for Fish & Wildlife



## Introduction and General Description

The Blackfoot River headwaters atop the Continental Divide at Roger's Pass and flows 132 miles westerly to its confluence with the Clark Fork River near Missoula. The Blackfoot River Watershed totals about 1.5 million acres and is nestled between the Continental Divide, Bob Marshall/Scapegoat Wilderness Areas, and Garnet Mountains. Land ownership in the watershed is 49% Federal, 5% State of Montana, 20% Plum Creek Timber Company, and 24% private. In general, public lands and significant portions of Plum Creek Timber Company land comprise the forested, mountain areas while private lands are located in the foothills and lower valley floor.

The Blackfoot Valley was shaped by glacial ice and a large glacial lake in the latter part of the Pleistocene Era.

Geologic, hydrologic, and geographic features combine to produce a wide array of plant and animal communities within the Blackfoot Watershed. The main source of this diversity is the wetland features associated with glacial lakes and ponds, bogs and fens, basin fed creeks and spring creeks, scrub/shrub riparian areas, and cottonwood forests. The rolling, glacially-formed landscape also provides the template for a rich assemblage of upland communities that includes grasslands, sagebrush steppe, aspen groves, and pine forests.

Unlike most other major valleys in western Montana, the Blackfoot Valley is relatively undeveloped. The valley has seen limited residential subdivision, and ranching remains the principle agricultural use.

## Species of Special Concern

The Blackfoot River Watershed is a world renown native trout fishery, supporting increasing numbers of fluvial bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.



The valley is part of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem which supports the largest population of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states. Grizzly bears, gray wolf, wolverine, and lynx are year-round residents. The native grassland/shrub communities provide habitat for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, one of only two remaining populations in Montana. The prairie pothole and riparian habitats are home to over 200 species of migratory birds including black terns, greater sandhill cranes, and long-billed curlews. Over 600 species of vascular plants occur in the watershed with nearly 30% found in the glaciated wetlands. Six rare or uncommon plant communities occur in the Blackfoot Valley, including the three-tip sagebrush/rough fescue plant association found nowhere else in the world.



Big Sky Magic Photo, Lawrence Dodge, 2000

## Threats

The primary threat to the Blackfoot Watershed is habitat fragmentation. Residential development, poor logging practices, invasive species encroachment, fire suppression, and improper grazing management have all combined to adversely affect fish and wildlife habitat. Other long-term threats include: de-watered streams, poorly designed irrigation structures, wetland drainage, sodbusting, mining, and road construction.

## Conservation Strategies

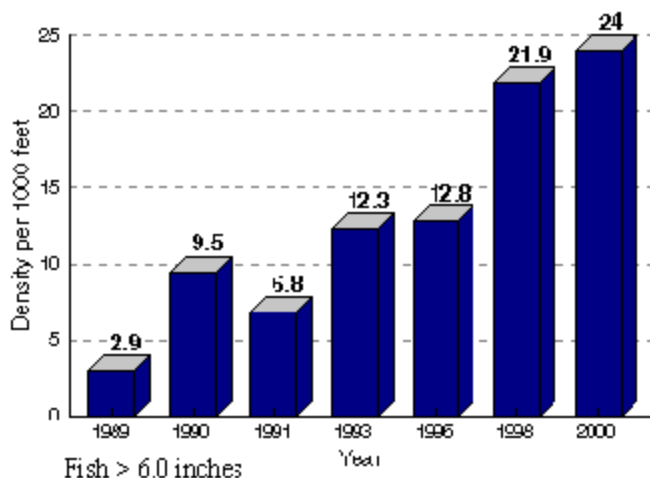
For 10 years, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program has been an active participant in an innovative watershed group called the Blackfoot Challenge. The Blackfoot Challenge is a proactive, “grass roots” organization which coordinates resource management

in the Blackfoot River Watershed. The Challenge’s mission is to coordinate efforts that will enhance, conserve, and protect the natural resources and rural lifestyle of the Blackfoot River Valley for present and future generations. The Challenge uses small committees to deal with issues such as habitat restoration, landscape protection, noxious weed management, drought management, education, and recreation. Habitat projects have focused on the restoration of drained wetlands, tributary streams, and riparian areas. Other projects include: re-seeding crop land to native grasses, grazing management, fish passage barrier removal, instream flow enhancement, and noxious weed management. Landscape protection measures have been focused on preserving the rural way of life and protecting critical fish and wildlife habitat through the use of conservation easements.

Easements (versus fee acquisition) are the preferred landscape protection tool for a variety of reasons including: easements keep the land in private ownership, they cost less to purchase, they are less expensive to manage, and easements are socially acceptable.

The Partners Program is also very active with two other watershed groups in the Blackfoot. They include the North Powell Conservation District and the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited. The North Powell Conservation District has focused its efforts on water quality issues associated with the Nevada Creek Watershed, a principle tributary to the Blackfoot River. The Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited has been working on restoring the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands to benefit native bull and westslope cutthroat trout.

**Estimated Westslope Cutthroat Trout Densities  
in the Scotty Brown Section of the Blackfoot River**



Installation of a Denil fish ladder on Salmon Creek.



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## Partners

Numerous Private Landowners  
Montana Land Reliance  
Blackfoot Challenge  
Montana Department of Transportation  
U.S. Forest Service  
Ducks Unlimited  
U.S. Bureau of Land Management  
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation  
U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation  
U.S. Geological Survey  
Montana Riparian Association  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
Montana State University  
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
University of Montana  
Montana Department of Natural Resources Conservation  
Blackfoot Telephone Cooperative  
Montana Department of Environmental Quality  
The Montana Water Course  
Plum Creek Timber Company  
Montana State University Extension Service  
The Nature Conservancy  
Big Blackfoot Trout Unlimited  
North Powell Conservation District  
Chutney Foundation

## Accomplishments

Over 350 miles of fish passage barrier removal  
35 miles of instream restoration  
57 miles of riparian restoration  
2,100 acres of wetlands restored  
2,300 acres of native grasslands restored  
40,000 acres of grazing management improvements  
18 in-stream water conservation projects  
Over 70,000 acres of voluntary perpetual  
conservation easements  
14 self-cleaning fish screens installed on irrigation ditches  
Numerous feedlots removed from streams

## Future Needs

While much has been accomplished in the Blackfoot Valley, more work remains. We have a lengthy waiting list of landowners requesting assistance, but staff shortages hinder response time. We also have an increasing backlog of biological monitoring needs. Bio-monitoring is a critical step in assessing the effectiveness of our restoration efforts on individual projects and on a watershed level. The Blackfoot project could easily spend an additional \$100,000 on assessments, monitoring and habitat restoration. Over the last 10 years, we have been successful at leveraging four non-federal dollars for every federal dollar spent in the Blackfoot Watershed. It is critical for other agencies and conservation groups active in the Blackfoot to continue their long-term efforts and support for watershed wide habitat restoration and protection. It is also imperative that we continue to be creative in fund raising efforts to support the conservation easement programs currently active in the valley.



42-acre wetland restoration.

# Blackfoot River Watershed (1,500,000 acres)

